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RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 4809
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3498
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0365
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0389
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 7912
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0310
RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0588
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMF/USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEAHLC/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001157

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2017

TAGS: PREF PHUM PREL SY IZ
SUBJECT: REPATRIATION OF IRAQI REFUGEES - NO MASS RETURN
HOME

REF: DAMASCUS 1141

Classified By: Charge Michael Corbin for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Since early October, Embassy sources have confirmed press and other reports of increasing numbers of Iraqi refugees leaving Syria for Iraq. On November 27, PolOff observed hundreds of Iraqis, carrying personal belongings of every shape, size and kind, loaded onto rented buses bound for Baghdad from the Damascus suburb of Sayidda Zeinab, a predominantly Shia community that is home to the second largest gathering of refugees in Syria. Sponsored by the Iraqi Embassy, this return-to-Iraq campaign offered Iraqis 1,000 USD, once in Iraq, and the promise of an armed motorcade on the Iraqi side of the border. While Syrian and Iraqi sources tell us that this project was being funded separately from the 15 million USD transferred by the Iraqi government to assist refugees in Syria, one Iraqi staffer confided that the Embassy was using part of the 15 million USD to finance this program. End Summary.

The Numbers

¶12. (SBU) Since early October, a continuing stream of press and other reports have indicated growing numbers of Iraqi refugees returning to Iraq from Syria. UNHCR estimates that 45,000 returned in October. On a recent visit to the al-Tanf border crossing the Syrian official in charge told Embassy staff that 1500 to 2000 Iraqis are returning each day. New visa restrictions have reportedly stemmed the flow of Iraqis into Syria to roughly 400-600 per day; by all accounts there is a net outflow of Iraqi refugees.

Bussing of Iraqis Planned as Trial Run

¶13. (C) Against that backdrop, the Iraqi Embassy has been

actively encouraging Iraqis to return home. In late November, Iraqi Second Secretary Berivan Dosky corroborated a flurry of recent press reporting that the Iraqi government was organizing a caravan of buses to ferry Iraqi refugees from Damascus to Iraq. Dosky told PolOffs the government of Iraq (GOI) planned a trial operation in which the GOI would rent 20 buses and offer free seats to any Iraqi citizen wishing to return home. She added that nearly 700 people had pre-registered for the trip, demonstrating that the perception that Iraq's security situation is improving is widely believed. She acknowledged many of those returning had "mixed feelings" about the security environment and that many may be returning home because they had exhausted all financial recourse in Syria. In the aggregate though, the desire to return was positive, according to Dosky.

¶4. (C) Dosky noted that should this trial run prove successful, the GOI would fund such free trips on a recurring weekly basis. Asked about convoy security, Dosky reported that once the convoy entered Iraq it would be protected by Iraqi and U.S. military land and air assets. Regarding reports that the GOI would be paying for air travel back to Iraq, Dosky said the GOI was only in a position to assist in waving baggage fees, not supplying free air fare. Dosky invited PolOff to witness the inaugural run scheduled for November 27.

Bussing Madness in Sayidda Zayneb

¶5. (C) On the afternoon of November 27, PolOff met with Iraqi Press Officer Ahmed Saad at the rally point for the coaches

in Sayidda Zeinab. Amid youths waving Iraqi flags and billboard sized posters urging Iraqis to return home, hundreds of smiling Iraqi faces waved through the large windows of rented coaches as well-wishers chanted slogans of support and sang traditional Iraqi folk songs. Press representatives from all the major Arab and Syrian networks were on hand to record the departure as was the Iraqi Charge d'Affaires. Ahmed reported that 20 buses were filled to capacity and nearly 1,000 Iraqis were aboard. (Note: PolOff counted 12 buses carrying roughly 500 persons. Additionally, the demographic composition was quite varied. Young and old men and women along with small children were present on every coach.) Ahmed explained that all religions were represented in this convoy and not solely Shia Iraqis.

¶6. (C) While Dosky had declined to provide details on how these trips would be funded, Ahmed acknowledged that part of the 15 million dollars, allotted to the Iraqi Embassy to assist Iraqi refugees, would be used to fund the bussing program. Additionally, Ahmed noted that the bussed Iraqis would receive a small stipend upon arrival in Iraq. He did not have a specific dollar amount but anecdotal reporting indicates that each Iraqi could receive as much as one thousand dollars.

¶7. (C) According to UNHCR contacts, those who returned to Iraq on this program would be barred from returning to Syria for a period of five years. In a December 4 meeting, Dosky dismissed these reports and added that the Iraqis were free to travel back to Syria without GOI restrictions, but added there may be Syrian government restrictions or fees.

Others Say \$15 Million Not Used

¶8. (C) At a November 29 dinner party, Iraqi Charge Hassan Abdul Aziz (protect) assured Poloff that Iraqi Minister of Finance Bayan Jabr al-Zubaida had signed over the 15 million USD directly to the Syrian government during his November 22 visit to Damascus. "That money went straight into the Syrian treasury," Abdul Aziz said, adding there was a gentlemen's agreement between the Iraqi and Syrian finance ministers that this money would be used to support Iraqi refugees. Abdul

Aziz explained that many Iraqis in Syria were running out of money, and the Iraqi government's program offered them a chance to return to Iraq free-of-charge. He acknowledged, however, that many returning Iraqis would not necessarily be able to return to their homes because they had been occupied in their absence. The GOI was working hard to address this issue, he reported. (Note: UNHCR in Damascus estimates that roughly 30 percent of Iraqis returning from Syria are unable to regain possession of their homes.)

¶19. (C) Another Embassy source with extensive ties to both the Syrian and Iraqi governments confirmed to Post that the Syrian government had received the 15 million USD and would be using it to support Iraqi refugees. Mahdi Sajjad, a Iraqi/British oil executive, insisted that the funds were paid directly to the Syrian government.

UNHCR Dubious of Return Program

¶10. (C) In meetings with visiting Representative Betty McCollum and a staffdel from the House Foreign Affairs and Judiciary committees, UNHCR personnel voiced deep concerns about the Iraqi return program. In particular, they reported that UNHCR sources in Baghdad had confirmed the murder of a seven-member family that had returned to Iraq from Syria last week (but was not included among those who traveled on the GOI-organized bus caravan.) UNHCR has cautioned that it

believes that the security situation in Iraq is not yet stable enough to encourage a mass return of refugees.

¶11. (C) According to UNHCR staff, those Iraqis returning home are doing so for three main reasons: they have no financial resources or prospects for work; they are concerned about their nebulous visa status due to new visa restrictions imposed by the Syrians; they believe that the security situation has improved in Iraq. A recent UNCHR survey of 100 Syrian Iraqi families found that only 14 percent of Iraqi refugees are returning because of improved security conditions. Nearly 70 percent cited financial and visa reasons for returning.

Winter of Discontent

¶12. (C) Comment: As many Iraqi refugees face dwindling financial resources and a less hospitable environment than they encountered from the Syrian government in previous years as seen in the imposition of new visa restrictions. The material incentives to return to Iraq are growing, as families struggle to make ends meet, educate their children, and find affordable lodging. Still, the Iraqis whom Embassy staff met in the previous week express great fears about the unknowns of returning. The Iraqi refugee informal gossip network is abuzz with horror stories about attacks on returnees. For now, most are seeking to tough it out here as international donors focus on how to provide relief on a larger scale to Iraqi refugees.

CORBIN